

## HIPPOCRATES' MEMORIES OF SCYTHIA: STORIES AND FAIRYTALES

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**Abstract:** *This presentation will deal with Hippocrates' journey to Scythia and with medical and general observations on that country and its people. The bulk of this information is derived from his work "On airs, waters and places" which is generally regarded as authentic. It is a comprehensive study of ethno-geography, correlating the medical problems of residents with climate changes, the political situation and the psychological aspects of their personality.*

*We thought that an interesting way to present this would be in the form of a story, both because the country itself was considered legendary, and because its people - men and women – that invaded Greek myths and the descriptions by Greek authors were reminiscent of fairytales.*

*We thus see that Scythia, a faraway country, unknown and charming, had, long before Hippocrates' visit, penetrated Greek thought through mythology, religion, commerce and art and the descriptions of contemporary travellers, like Herodotus.*

*It should be noted here that certain historians are unconvinced that he travelled to Scythia and believe, instead, that he describes the impressions of another. His work, however, "On airs, waters and places", is believed to be authentic. It begins with a description of this nation, writing that "What is called the Scythian desert is prairies, rich in meadows, high-lying, and well watered; for the rivers which carry off the water from the plains are large. There live those Scythians which are called Nomades, because they have no houses, but live in wagons. The main diseases they suffer from are infertility and testicular atrophy.*

*The love, admiration and cultural affinity that the locals feel for the Greeks are still as pronounced as we suppose and hope it was when Hippocrates visited them to write his "On airs, waters and places"*

**Key words:** *Hippocrates, Scythia, Herodotus, Testicular atrophy, Scythian legends*

### Introduction

Usually, when one speaks of Hippocrates, at least to his admirers, not dissenters, he will mention that "*He was the first who separated medicine from religion and laid the foundations of scientific medicine. He is considered as the Father of Medicine*" and such similar

laudatory statements.

As if he was a meteorite that fell from the sky and illuminated the hitherto superstitious and obscurantist medicine. If the speaker is more educated on the matter, he will try to mention his intellectual ancestors, namely the Pre-Socratic philosophers and scientists. In a more in-

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dept analysis, he would comment on the cultural or political climate during Hippocrates's era, which allowed his creative output. Pretty much though, we will experience an attempt to link the Father of Medicine in the Golden Age and its various exponents, such as Socrates and Plato, Pericles and Pheidias.

This review approach is rarely extended beyond the Greek space. So, we thought that, in this open and productive event of the *IV-th Balkan Congress of History of Medicine and the VII-th National Congress of History of Medicine* we should dare something quite different.

To present the political and cultural environment of regions we know, with certainty or even with some doubts that he visited, outside the Greek territory.

To proceed, that is, a more international description of said environment.

### Material

This presentation will deal with Hippocrates' journey to Scythia and with medical and general observations on that country and its people.

The bulk of this information is derived from his work "*On airs, waters and places*" which is generally regarded as authentic.

It is a comprehensive study of ethnogeography, correlating the medical problems of residents with climate changes, the political situation and the psychological aspects of their personality.

I thought that an interesting way to present this would be in the form of a story, both because the country itself was considered legendary, and because its people - men and women - that invaded Greek myths and the descriptions by Greek authors were reminiscent of fairytales. And even perhaps because we were often narrated the life and works of Hippocrates as a tale.

I will not delve into the general reasons

Hippocrates acquired a mythical dimension in the public mind soon after his death and, perhaps, even more so today.

He competes only with Alexander the Great who through the century-old popular book *Phyllada*, became a favourite story in East and West alike.

I will present first, only a few Illustrations from three beautiful medieval manuscripts.

### Illustration 1

The left side of the first Illustration shows the delegation of Queen Saracithe visiting Hippocrates' grave somewhere in Greece. Saracithe was supposed to have been converted to Christianity by Joseph of Arimathea.

The Hippocratic shrine was decorated with crosses, which makes sense, as in the Middle Ages the Father of Medicine was considered more or less a Christian. I do not know if the finding of the actual tomb of Hippocrates in Greece in the early 19th century is any less mythical; the upper right side of the Illustration shows the same scene in another manuscript that we will analyse later.

The tale culminates with the fabled discovery in Hippocrates's tomb of an ivory box, containing the work "*The Book of Prognostics*", which was in fact written seven hundred years after Hippocrates's death, a predictive text on dermatological lesions.

In the centre of the Illustration, we see an Arabic copy of the work from the 13th century.

### Illustration 2

The tale becomes extravagant, when, the same manuscript, from the Circle of the "*Holy Grail*", shows Hippocrates treating the nephew of Emperor Augustus (who lived half a millennium later).

The good doctor then stayed at in Rome, got involved in a love affair and hid

in a hanging basket to visit his illicit lover, as shown on the right side of the image.

Given that such fictitious follies on a fully documented historical person were largely credible, particularly in the West, we can see the room for the fantastic that folk tales about distant and unknown countries, like Scythia, allowed.

Let us try to understand this place. Starting from the land, this is a fabulous area with dark woods, mist, dragons and fairies. But let us define it geographically. It is a huge land, north of the Black Sea. Scythia's location and size varied over time, from the Altai Mountains where Mongolia, China, Russia, and Kazakhstan meet, along southern Ukraine to the area of the lower section of the Danube, Bulgaria and Georgia. The Chinese called the Sake (Asian Scythians) Sai. Scythia was noted for its large rivers like the Don, which formed its main communication routes, and its many high snow-capped mountains, which were responsible for the ever-lasting cold in the country. Its people, the Scythians were tribes of undefined origin. They were first referred to in Assyrian codes of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.

After many adventures, they left for the above areas where they lived as nomads for centuries.

Both men and women were excellent equestrians and warriors. More about these fearless women will be said in the body of speech on Hippocrates' medical information. Later, the Scythians come in contact with the Greek colonies of the Black Sea; have extensive commercial, political and cultural contact with them and are partly urbanised.

Typical cultural elements of the Scythian civilisation include abundant scattered mined tombs containing impressive gold jewellery. In fact, it was in the broader area of Scythia that the Argonauts found the Golden Fleece, where, according to Pausanias, the land

produced vast quantities of gold, guarded by the mythical sphinxes, creatures with a female body, a lion's head and griffin wings. From the 4th BC century, we can talk about two different groups, those who live in northern Scythia and continue their traditional lifestyles and those of the South, who are somehow Hellenised.

From the culture of the first group, we present in the next Illustration, an 8th century bronze buckle and a gold Panther, while, from South Scythia a golden comb with Greek influences.

This influence is most obvious in works from the Greek commercial cities of the North Black Sea, as shown by the comparison between leaden bull head from their religious worship centre near Olvia of Scythia and similar relief heads from the base of a marble column in the sanctuary of Delos.

As time goes by, the Greek influence becomes more striking, as shown by A Scythian coin of the 1st century BC, which brings to mind Cavafy's poem on Orophernes, son of Ariarathus.

Before applied art however, religion had introduced Scythia in the cultural subconscious as a distant country that raised gods or as a place of exile imposed, again by the gods.

From the time lost in the mists of myth it was said that the father of Uranus, that is the great-grandfather of Zeus, was born in Scythia. Uranus' father was Acmon of Scythia. That was where the northernmost gods were born.

The son of Hercules, Scythis, became king of Scythia. Prometheus was exiled to Scythia, where Iphigenia was also taken, in specific to Tauris, when the goddess Artemis took her in a cloud from Aulis to spare her from being sacrificed.

In his tragedy "Iphigenia in Tauris", Euripides beautifully describes the moment when Orestes recognizes his sister at the sanctuary: "*During the preparatory ritual,*

*Orestes started talking with Iphigenia in Greek; to their great joy, they quickly discovered who they were.*

*When she learned of the purpose of his mission, she immediately pulled down the statue from its pedestal so that Orestes could take it... According to this version, the ship finally moored in Vravrona, where Iphigenia placed the statue and, while the temple was being built, followed Orestes to Delphi. At the sanctuary of Delphi she met Electra, brought her back to Athens and wed her to Pylades” (9).*

A similar description exists in the third hymn of Callimachus.

The area was also visited by Herodotus, who provides us with extensive descriptions of its geography, inhabitants and diseases that complement the picture that emerges from the work of Hippocrates.

His work is believed to have been written around the same time with Hippocrates’ “*On airs, waters and places*”, although it seems that neither of the two authors knew of the other’s book.

At the end of his “Histories”, the Father of History attributes the self-indulgence of Asians to the stable climate, while, regarding the Scythians, he is mainly concerned with the relationship between the local geologic and climatic conditions and their war tactics, than with their ordinary diseases.

A similar method was later used by the Romans to explain the martial arts of Germans living in similar conditions with the Scythians.

An early description by Herodotus of the use of cannabis by the Scythians is of particular interest to the history of medicine.

According to many linguists, the word cannabis itself is of Scythian origin. In book four of his “Histories”, Herodotus describes the ritual use of cannabis after a funeral “[...]”

The Scythians, as I said, take some of this hemp-seed, and, creeping under the felt coverings, throw it upon the red-hot stones; immediately it smokes, and gives out such a vapour as no Grecian vapour-bath can exceed; the Scythians, delighted, shout for joy”.

The History of Herodotus was confirmed by archaeological findings, when, in 1292, Professor SI Rudenko unearthed, in a tomb in Pazryk, in the Western Altai area, a device for its use and cannabis seeds.

Herodotus also mentions the story of Anacharsis, a young noble Scythian who travels to many countries, including Greece, is impressed by its customs and tries, in vain, to introduce them to Scythia, where he is murdered. In his Panegyricus, Isocrates (436-338 BC) states that the Scythians are the most powerful and majestic people. (Panegyricus 67, 08 -5)

We thus see that Scythia, a faraway country, unknown and charming, had, long before Hippocrates’ visit, penetrated Greek thought through mythology, religion, commerce and art and the descriptions of contemporary travellers, like Herodotus.

Although still regarded as semi-barbarous, contacts with Greece constantly increased. Therefore, it was not surprising that Hippocrates travel there, nor that he did not be feeling alienated or treated as a curiosity. It should be noted here that certain historians are unconvinced that he travelled to Scythia and believe, instead, that he describes the impressions of another.

His work, however, “*On airs, waters and places*”, is believed to be authentic. It begins with a description of this nation, writing that “What is called the Scythian desert is prairies, rich in meadows, high-lying, and well watered; for the rivers which carry off the water from the plains are large. There live those Scythians which are called Nomades, because they have no

houses, but live in wagons. [...] In these wagons the women live, but the men are carried about on horses, and the sheep, oxen, and horses accompany them; [...]. They eat boiled meat, and drink the milk of mares, and also eat hippace, which is cheese prepared from the milk of the mare. [...] the Scythian race, like the Egyptian, have a uniformity of resemblance, different from all other nations. [...] The changes of the seasons, too, are not great nor violent, for, in fact, they change gradually; and therefore their figures resemble one another, [...].

For these reasons their shapes are gross and fleshy, with ill-marked joints, of a humid temperament, [...] I will give you a strong proof of the humidity of their constitutions. You will find the greater part of the Scythians, and all the Nomades, with marks of the cautery on their shoulders, arms, wrists, breasts, hip-joints, and loins, and that for no other reason but the humidity and flabbiness of their constitution, for they can neither strain with their bows, nor launch the javelin from their shoulder owing to their humidity and atony: [...] and as to the women, it is amazing how flabby and sluggish they are. The Scythian race are tawny from the cold, and not from the intense heat of the sun, for the whiteness of the skin is parched by the cold, and becomes tawny”.

The main diseases they suffer from are infertility and testicular atrophy.

Hippocrates attributes the first to the years thee spend horse-riding, which hardens the outer genitalia and the heavy clothes they wear because of cold that prevent even the palpation of the male genitalia and therefore their sexual stimulation.

Relating to the above is an incised decoration in an amber vase from the Kul’Oba region, now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Regarding the

women, he assumes that their infertility is due to their obesity, which prevents the sperm from reaching the vagina unobstructed. Hippocrates brings as proof the fact that the female slaves of the Scythians who are thinner and more agile because of their constant activity, and bear children immediately when they come into contact with another man.

However, the indigenous population attributes this testicular atrophy and accompanying eunuch-like conduct to a divine curse. For this reason, after they fail two or three times to impregnate a woman, they believe that their goddess cursed them, wear women’s clothing and engage in womanly occupations.

Hippocrates however believes that the true cause is the phlebotomy of the posterior auricular vein, which they often perform. He believes that this vein is responsible for the creation of sperm.

Hippocrates’ description of a feature unique to the race of the Scythians is also very interesting. That is, that their women ride and fight like men. In infancy, they cauterise their right breast so that they may be able to shoot comfortably with their arrows. They do not marry without first killing three enemies. These were the legendary Amazons, of we know much mainly through the mythological cycle of Theseus.

### Illustration 3

In the third Illustrations we see first a scene from a vessel, with the battle between the Athenians under Theseus and the Amazons under Hippolyta, while in the next illustration we see a classical display of a wounded Amazon and, for comparison, a corresponding painting of 1904, but in the next, militancy has been replaced by the love of Theseus for the Amazon Antiope. On the side however, Hercules continues his labours.

Summing up the work of Hippocrates

on the nosology of the Scythians, and more generally on the influence of climate on health, it should be noted that despite his many insightful comments, he did not entirely avoid ambiguities and generalities that raised controversy from a very early point. Already, his most ardent admirer, Galen, six centuries later, tried to reconcile the statements of his idol with his own knowledge.

To this end, he wrote "*Comments On airs, waters and places*", which was unfortunately lost. It exists only in a translation from Syrian by Hunayn ibn Ishaq (809-873 AD)

Rather than end with the classic fairytale ending "*they lived happily ever after*", I will present a brief overview of events after Hippocrates' visit there and the exchange of cultural with Greek the area. In the early Christian era, it is said that St. Andrews visited Asia Minor, Byzantium and Scythia, where he preached Christianity in Kiev.

From the later Byzantine period, we know of the wartime relations of the Byzantines with the Scythians. The famous miniature of Hippocrates donning Byzantine clothes, from the work of Ioannes Actuarius was dedicated to his patron, the Grand Duke Alexios Apokaukos, who is shown the next miniature. He was given this as a medical handbook to accompany him on his expedition against the Scythians. In an ironic twist of history, his daughter eventually married the brother of the Scythians' ruler, Theodore.

Being nomads and warriors, in subsequent centuries, the Scythians spread out in many directions so the effect of the Scythians on European civilisation is much more pronounced than generally believed. Most blue-eyed blond Europeans have, at some point in their history, attempted to prove their Scythian origin.

This seems surprising at first, since

these people, based mainly on reports of Greek and Roman historians, were considered synonymous with brutality. A book that published ten years ago attempts to collect all the European myths whose core originates from corresponding Scythian stories.

In his King Lear, Shakespeare presents the Scythian as a cannibal who eats his children. Old English writers, who wanted to prove the superiority of their race over the Irish, held them as descendants of the Scythians based on a rumour that they drank human blood and were nomads.

Not surprisingly, the other Celtic race of the British Isles, the Scots, also claimed a Scythian origin. As far back as 1320, the famous Declaration of Arbroath, signed by all the Scottish nobles and sent to the Pope, proudly advocates their Scythian origin, concluding that for this reason that they cannot tolerate an English king.

Through a complex alleged genealogy tree, even the French kings of the Carolingian Dynasty proudly claimed that they descended from the Scythians. The romantic spirit of the 19th century identified the wild Scythian warriors with incorruptible democratic fighters, something like Cavafy's barbarians, who would save mankind through the destruction of Rome. Tellingly, the French work of the Cycle of the Enlightenment "*Voyage Du Jeune Anacharsis*" written by Jean Jacques Barthelemy (1715-1795), which repeated the Scythian's ancient admiration for the democratic structures of Classical Greece, was translated into Greek by Rigas Feraios. Similar claims are made in modern times by the Serbs, Croats and Lithuanians. Even the website of the the Australian Skopjans, who advance the idea of an Aegean Macedonia, features a map showing the supposed origin of all the peoples of the southeastern Balkans from the Scythians; the Skopjans see themselves as their legitimate successors. It was

natural for the Jews believe Scythians as their compatriots. They are supposed to originate from prisoners of the ten tribes of Israel who fled to the North Black Sea after the occupation of Babylon Aeschylus, Herodotus (Book 4, chapters 24, 46) and Strabo (Book 8, chapters 3, 7), and even Keating's Irish history in 1723, "prove" that the Scythians were smart, excellent traders using a multitude of translators, honest and did not eat pork, "thus" Jews. Art provides objects that could be used as "evidence". It is with this contribution of art in the understanding of the spread of the relationships of love and prejudice between Europeans and the Scythians that I will conclude.

#### Illustration 4

I present a series of illustrations of Sphinxes from various eras starting with a Classic Greek krater from Eretria showing a Sphinx and proceeding with a pre-classical fresco from northern Iran, which shows a Scythian horseman behind a surprisingly similar Sphinx. Then a plate with the scene of Oedipus and the Sphinx and finally, we jump to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, presenting, on the one hand a French gold and enamel buckle with the Sphinx and on the other a set of cast-iron railings from a 19<sup>th</sup> century mansion of Patras, now part of my personal collection. Please forgive me for finishing with an even more personal testimony: A photo of me from my visit to current Scythia, in Ukraine. I arrived at the city of Nizna, headquarters of the national benefactors Zosimades brothers, and, at the entrance of the school, I was welcomed by young students with Greek flags and evzone uniforms. The love, admiration and cultural affinity that the locals feel for the Greeks are still as pronounced as we suppose and hope it was when Hippocrates visited them to write his "*On airs, waters and places*".

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